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Japan's Food Education Initiatives: The Building Blocks of the New Japanese Food Pyramid

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Report Highlights:

The Japanese food pyramid was recently remodeled in order to make it more relevant to the typical Japanese, especially those between the ages of 18-49 who often dine away from home. Main changes include food recommendations based on Japanese prepared dishes instead of raw ingredients and the promotion of fish over red meat. These changes can be attributed to GOJ efforts to promote local production and consumption of Japanese agricultural products. The pyramid may cause a slight shift in consumer preferences that create new challenges and opportunities for American exporters.

Includes PSD Changes: No
Includes Trade Matrix: No
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The Japanese Food Pyramid was recently revised as part of the Japanese “shokuiku” (...food education) campaign. The previous Pyramid (Appendix A) resembles the USDA pyramid, which it was originally modeled after. The new Pyramid was significantly reformed from the previous version to emphasize that one can only attain optimal health through a balanced diet and exercise.

The Pyramid is based on research conducted by the Shokuiku Committee, who borrowed the fundamental dietary principles from the USDA pyramid, but it has been slightly altered to suit what the Japanese eat and what nutrients are in these foods and to show how to make the best food choices when dining outside of the home. The Japanese food pyramid outlines five food groups (grains, vegetables, meats, dairy products and fruits) and the quantities within each that one must consume to maintain a daily balanced diet.

The Pyramid is a graphical representation of one aspect of the Shokuiku Committees’ food safety education initiative. Its main message is the importance of maintaining a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and exercise. However, the Japanese pyramid emphasizes consumption of locally produced Japanese foods and the use of Japanese cooking practices. The lack of exercise or a balanced diet can lead to diabetes, metabolic syndrome and other health complications.

The Japanese food pyramid (Figure 1) is based on the American food pyramid (Figure 2) and resembles it in terms of general food groupings and relative proportions necessary to maintain a balanced diet. However, there are a few differences that the two food pyramids have that should be pointed out.

Figure 1: Japanese Food Pyramid



First, the shape of the Japanese Pyramid is an upside-down version of the USDA Pyramid. The Japanese Pyramid resembles a child's spinning top (a traditional Japanese toy), with a man running at the top of it. This is to call attention to the food groups that one should consume the most (i.e. grains and vegetables, followed by the others). The man running at the top indicates the need to supplement the balanced diet with exercise. The string tab on the side of the pyramid suggests a consumption of two servings of Japanese beer (possibly a concept borrowed from the French wives' tale to drink a glass of red

Figure 2: USDA Food Pyramid



wine for one's heart condition) or one can of juice. (Note that the American food pyramid was revised in 1992, with a man climbing up the pyramid's side stairs as exercise).

The second and bigger conceptual difference is that the Japanese food pyramid consists of prepared dishes, whereas the American version consists of ingredients. The main reason behind the substitution of ingredients with Japanese dishes is to make the food pyramid's concepts easier to understand to a growing number of single people who usually dine outside the home or buy take out foods. The Shokuiku Committee is specifically targeting individuals within the 18-49-age range, which has an increasing number of people who fall into this category. The aim is to teach these individuals how to order foods at restaurants according to the amounts they need to maintain a daily balanced diet. By displaying prepared foods instead of ingredients, the Committee hopes to: (1) show restaurant chefs what dishes to prepare to fulfill the balanced diet requirements, (2) allow individuals to quickly visualize whether or not they consumed an adequate amount of each food group.

The third major difference is that the meat group of the Japanese and USDA Pyramids reflect different amounts of red meats and fish. Whereas the Japanese Pyramid features mostly fish in its meat group, the USDA Pyramid consists almost entirely of red meats. The substitution of rice for grains in the Japanese food pyramid is also a noticeable difference.

The Shokuiku Committee promotes the Pyramid through three venues: gakkou (...school systems), katei (...households), and kyoiku (...education policy). The Ministry of Agriculture, Forestry and Fisheries relies on mass communication channels, such as the annual shokuiku convention, and on the labeling of foods as the primary promotion methods for introducing the new pyramid. In addition, Japanese food expert Dr. Yukio Hattori is proposing the production and marketing of goods such as cell phone straps, stickers and other small trinkets as a subtle way to introduce into mainstream Japan the concept of the Pyramid's five food groups. The Ministry of Education, Sports and Arts is currently discussing a revision of textbooks used by public elementary and middle schools to include these new concepts of food safety education. On September 3rd, 2005 the Cabinet Office will meet to decide whether or not to officially insert shokuiku content into elementary and middle school textbooks. If this bill is approved, food safety education will be promoted in Japan's gakkou (school) through teaching elementary and middle school children to how to maintain a healthy lifestyle with a balanced diet and the exercise during their gym classes.

As a result of the Shokuiku Committee's efforts to promote food education and "the five Japanese food group Pyramid," American exporters can expect a possible increase in preference for traditional Japanese agricultural products. However, Shokuiku proponents don't seem to be going so far as to say that locally produced goods are superior to those that are imported from the U.S. and other countries, nor does it assert that US agricultural products cannot be incorporated into Japanese healthy lifestyle. According to food expert Yukio Hattori, the manner in which US agricultural imports are prepared is the key to determining their health properties. This way of thinking could create opportunities for Japanese businesses and consumers to purchase US agricultural products and prepare them with traditional Japanese cooking styles. Through this system, both American exporters and Japanese consumers can support one another in terms of import/export exchange and health policy as well.

Appendix A: Japanese Food Pyramid (previous version)



Source: Southeastern Michigan Dietetic Association website

Appendix B: Comparison of American and Japanese Food Pyramids

A comparison of the old four food group matrix

Food Group	JAPAN	U.S.
Milk/Dairy	Soybean products, some milk products	Milk, cheese, yogurt, ice cream
Meat	Fish, some poultry, some eggs, some red meat	Beef, pork, veal, lamb, poultry, fish, cheese, eggs
Vegetables and Fruit	Many of the same kinds of vegetables, plus others; not as much fruit consumed in Japan as in the U.S.	Green and yellow vegetables, tomatoes, citrus and other fruits
Bread and Cereal	Rice in many forms; bread is becoming more popular	Bread and other wheat products, breakfast cereal, corn, rice